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SUBJECT: ST. KITTS AND NEVIS HOSTS REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON
CRIME

Summary

¶11. (U) In an effort to get a grip on escalating, gang-related violent crime in the Eastern Caribbean, St. Kitts and Nevis hosted the first Regional Conference on Youth Crime and Violence Prevention on June 22-23. The conference sought to define the scope of the problem, establish why the violence is occurring, ascertain workable options for prevention, and implement effective interventions. Leaders from around the region were in attendance, including Prime Minister Patrick Manning of Trinidad and Tobago, Prime Minister Denzil Douglas of St. Kitts and Nevis, CARICOM Secretary General Edwin Carrington, and OAS A/SYG Albert Ramdin. PM Douglas opened the conference with a surprising speech in which he acknowledged his party's inability to reduce crime over the past 14 years. The conference highlighted two main causes of youth crime: the absence of effective parenting and the lack of a juvenile court system. All in attendance agreed that the current crime wave is threatening security in the region.

PM Douglas Sets Somber Tone

¶12. (U) Prime Minister Denzil Douglas of St. Kitts and Nevis opened the Conference with a candid presentation in which he pointed out how, 14 years ago, his party came into office during a crime wave promising to fight crime. Fourteen years later, Douglas admitted, no progress has been made and the problem has grown. Douglas cautioned that rampant crime could cause the Eastern Caribbean to lose everything it has worked for since gaining independence. This frank speech, highlighting his own party's weaknesses, was all the more surprising as it came just months or weeks before St. Kitts and Nevis is due to hold elections.

Causes of Crime Easy to See

¶13. (U) The conference brought to the forefront several catalysts of increased crime in the region, but the most notable recurring theme was the absence of effective parenting. Many children grow up in one-parent homes, primarily with their mothers, and lack any kind of real supervision during their most formative years. With few options to occupy their time, almost complete freedom from supervision, and the siren's song of easy wealth and "respect" from the drug trade, youths are easily lured into a life of crime and drug use. Much of the Eastern Caribbean lacks programs for early intervention to compete against the pull of youth gangs, which can also serve as surrogate families. Young impressionable individuals are easily recruited. In fact, several school children who were brought in to speak at the conference informed the attendees that

parents often push them into criminal activity due to family financial problems and a lack of any real economic opportunity for their children. The children frankly admitted that the non-existence of any real parenting is a major contributor to the growth of crime.

¶4. (U) On the prevention and rehabilitation side, many commentators noted that the Eastern Caribbean lacks a coherent juvenile justice system. Without a mechanism to deal with juvenile offenders, all persons are prosecuted under laws set up for adult offenders. Treating pre-teen and teenage youths as adults in the court systems only further pushes them down the wrong path. Without any juvenile rehabilitation programs, young minds that otherwise could have been steered away from crime are lost as they enter the adult court and prison systems. Conference attendees agreed that a juvenile justice system, with alternative sentencing and early intervention programs, is a critical part of any proposed solution to the problem of youth crime.

...But Solutions Hard to Come By

¶5. (U) While the litany of causes of youth crime and the resources needed to address the issue were easily identified, solutions attempted or planned were in obvious short supply. There was no answer to the question of what countries in the region are doing to address the problem. Strapped for financial, infrastructure, and institutional resources, the participant countries simply do not have sufficient ability to fight the problem. Police are understaffed, undertrained,

BRIDGETOWN 00000448 002 OF 002

and underpaid, leaving drug gangs often the de facto authorities in select neighborhoods. Most regional governments confess to a certain shell-shocked impotence to address a problem that they see as having quickly ballooned beyond their modest ability to address it.

Comment

¶6. (U) By their own admission, the Eastern Caribbean has been caught off guard by this wave of violent crime, which has quickly become national security issue Number One for at least the smaller islands. With little or no resources dedicated to the issue, the problem is likely to get worse before getting better. Currently the countries of the Eastern Caribbean are in the early stages of defining the problem and discussing possible roads to a solution. The candid speech by Douglas reflects just how severe the problem is. The conference was a good first step by focusing high-level attention to identify and discuss the scope of the problem. The challenge now, participants recognized, is to secure the resources to address the problems, which will require both regional and international participation. The Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) currently being developed between the U.S. and the Caribbean could not come at a more critical time.

¶7. (U) Many of the concerns raised in this conference mirrored exactly the concerns Attorney General Holder heard when he met CARICOM Attorneys General during his May 21-23 visit to Barbados. Development of a juvenile justice system, as well as the creation of mitigation programs such as life skills and work skills development should be a key component of our efforts to build a multi-year security assistance program for the region under CBSI. We are certain that host country governments will welcome such programs and participate in their development, and we look forward to engaging with Washington agencies to construct such programs. Startup costs may be high, but the administration costs are likely to be much more modest, making such programs ideal, sustainable candidates for CBSI funding.

